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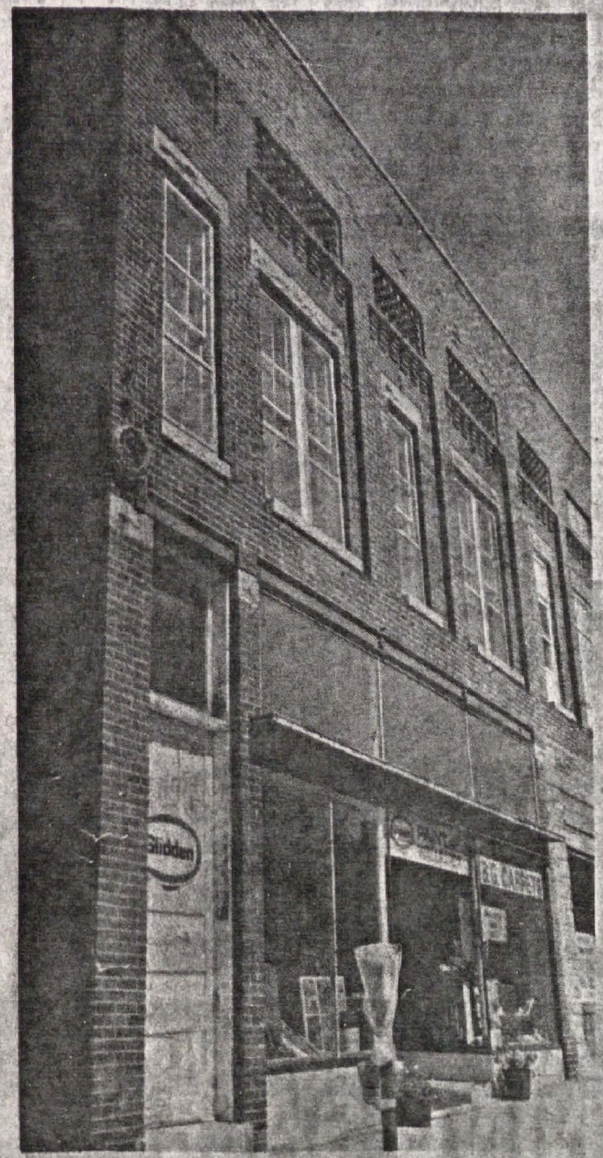
Lowell History

PIONEER HISTORY



The former Grant Department Store on E. Commercial Ave. has a long history in downtown Lowell, and both the ground floor and the second story have housed a variety of businesses.

From the Three Creeks Historical Association
by Richard C. Schmal

The building at 317 E. Commercial Ave. in Lowell, now the home of B and G Carpet Sales, was for many years the Grant Brothers Department Store, the home of "courteous service, prompt attention, and right prices."

In the early days of Lowell, the area was known as "Halsted's First Addition," platted soon after the original 16 lots of 1852. One of the first owners was Mortimer Gregg, who in 1871 was a partner with Tunis Frank in the undertaking and furniture business. They occupied a large frame building with living quarters on the second floor. Dan Collins also was in business at that site for a time.

George W. Heilig (1855-1938), son of William Heilig, came to Lowell from Remington in 1897 to open a bakery and confectionery in the Gregg building, then owned by Perr Clark. Only a year later, on his birthday, Heilig lost his business in the big fire of 1898, his loss being listed as $1,000. Heilig then moved to the south side of Commercial Ave., and soon after built the building just west of the present Roberts Drug Store.

Perry D. Clark (1835-1904) was the son of 1837 pioneer Jabez Clark (1808-1876) and Marietta (Barrows) Clark (died 1899). Perry married Sarah Jane Thorn (1841-1919), daughter of Jonah Thorn, one of Lowell's first businessmen. Perry served as a sergeant in Co K, 43rd Illinois Infantry, and was founder of the brick yard that was at the north end of Liberty St. in Lowell. In 1900, he built the building now at 317 E. Commercial Ave. He also constructed a long masonry building to the north, used for many years as one of Lowell's early auto garages. The building on Commercial Ave. was rented to the Grant brothers for their department store in 1900, and was later purchased by them.

Thomas Grant (1865-1943), one of Lowell's progressive businessmen, was born locally, the son of Thomas (died 1874) and Bridget (Murphy) Grant (1828-1893). His father came to Chicago from Scotland and then came to Lowell in 1860, and became active in the construction business. The younger Grant worked as a section hand and as a farmer, passed a business course at Valparaiso University, and became a carpentry contractor. In 1900, Thomas and his brother, James, opened their mercantile establishment. During Tom's four years of service as Cedar Creek Township Trustee, many good bridges and roads were built. He served on the Indiana State Board of Agriculture in the 1920's & was busy traveling to the state capitol to supervise the opening of the state fair each year. He was also elected to the office of Lake County Sheriff in 1910, and served as a state senator from this area.

James Grant (1861-1937), the other partner in the department store, was also a well-known businessman, active in the community and church. He had several years of experience working for the Lynch Brothers department store prior to 1900.

In 1906, the following advertisement appeared in the book, 'Lake County Souvenir': Grant Brothers "dealers in general merchandise, a complete line of dry goods, boots, shoes, rubber goods, hats, caps, cloaks and furnishing goods. Our grocery department: full fresh, and choice. Bring your produce. Motto: Courteous treatment, prompt attention, and right prices."

Thomas Purchase, a nephew of World War I veteran, was an employee of the store for many years. The partners purchased the building from Perry Clark's estate in 1907, and in 1910 the brothers rented the three front rooms of the two phone companies in the town of Lowell at that time. The rent was $100 per year, paid quarterly, for the rooms used as a central office.

Earlier in the history of the building, there was a large slanted skylight facing north on the upper floor, which was used for a photographic studio. The old equipment was still there in the late 1920's, including an adjustable stand to hold a customer's head firmly in place while the time exposure was taken - no doubt one of the reasons for few smiles on old photos.

An old newspaper clipping reveals that there was an early beauty parlor housed in the upstairs rooms in 1923. American Legion Post 101 had their first home above the department store in the early 1920's, and Dr. BEhmlander, a dentist had his office there for a few years. A well-known lawyer, Morriss "Doc" Gilbert, also had his office there. In the early 1900's, stairs from the sidewalk on Commercial Ave. led down to a barbershop in the lower level.

Byrl Grant, son of Thomas, was associated with his father in the business thru the years, and with his son T. Robert Grant and family, continued the operation of the store after the deaths of the partners in 1937 and 1943. Byrl passed away in 1972, and his son T. Robert carried on the ownership of the business until 1976, when the store was closed. The building was sold in 1977 and rented out several times until it was sold to the Joseph and Ann Blandford, who also own the large brick building to the north, now a warehouse.

Four generations of the Grants, descendents of the pioneer Nichols family, took part in the operation of the well-known department store in downtown Lowell for 76 years. Many readers will remember the low, round swivel stools at the counters, the large assortment of yard goods, the busy grocery department in the rear, and the dry goods section, all under the ornate metal ceiling which is still visible in the carpet store.